



Catholic Faith, Life & Creed

Doctrinal Catechesis Sessions for adults based on
the Church Year, the Liturgy, & the Sunday Scriptures

Breaking Open the Word

by Mary Birmingham

Breaking Open the Word THE EPIPHANY OF THE LORD, ABC



Basilica of [Sant'Apollinare Nuovo](#) in [Ravenna](#), Italy: The [Three Wise Men](#)" (named Balthasar, Melchior, and Gaspar). Mosaic of a Ravennate italian-byzantine workshop, completed within 526 AD by the so-called "Master of Sant'Apollinare".



Begin with the Sign of the Cross

In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

Opening Prayer

Option 1. Use Opening Prayer from the Sunday Liturgy.

Option 2.

Epiphany Prayer of the Church in Jerusalem

O God

Who by a star

guided the wise men to the worship of your Son

we pray you to lead to yourself

the wise and great of every land

that unto you every knee may bow,

and every thought be brought into captivity

Through Jesus Christ our Lord.

[The Church in Jerusalem and the Middle East.](#)

Catholic
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Word worksheets
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Doctrinal Sessions.

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Liturgical Context

- ▶ Today is another feast of manifestation in the Christmas cycle.
- ▶ This celebration is centered on the manifestation of Christ, the Light.
- ▶ The liturgical color of the Christmas season is white.
- ▶ Epiphany is the feast in which we hear about the arrival of the three wise men from the East—the magi.
- ▶ This is a feast of Christ's manifestation not just to Israel, but to the entire world.
- ▶ This is more than a celebration of God's manifestation to the Gentile world—it is another powerful celebration of the Incarnation and God's manifestation of himself to the world in the person of his only Son.
- ▶ This is a manifestation of God among many other manifestations in this season—manifestation to Mary, the shepherds, through baptism and now to the gentiles.
- ▶ This feast remembers and makes present God's defining act in human history—the Incarnation of his Son which begins his work of salvation through his eventual death and resurrection and ascension to the eternal throne.

Catechist invites participants to respond to the following questions in groups of two, then surface insights in the wider group.

- ▶ What spoke to your heart in today's liturgy?
- ▶ What reading, symbol, music, homily, spoke to you and why did it speak to you?
- ▶ What touched you the most in today's Gospel?

If time is a consideration, omit reflection on one of the readings.

First Reading: Isaiah 60, 1-6

- ▶ Today's first reading foreshadows the future Christ event in which Christ was manifested to the entire world.
- ▶ Christ came to save the whole world—not just Israel. Today's feast celebrates that truth.
- ▶ The third book of Isaiah evokes expectant joy over what will be unfolding for them.
- ▶ Prophets were gifted by the Spirit to address immediate events as well as events that would take place in the future.
- ▶ Through the prophetic oracles they uttered they revealed God's plan for the salvation of the world.
- ▶ When we hear God's word spoken over and over again throughout the generations we begin to appreciate God's overall plan of salvation for the human race.
- ▶ Prophets are able to see with God's eyes. They are gifted with the vision to see the fulfillment of God's plan.
- ▶ The prophet in today's reading is able to look to that future light that will illumine the world darkened by sin.
- ▶ The prophet looks to that future city where the eyes of the human beings will be opened to see the brilliance, power and majesty of God.
- ▶ The manifestation and glory of God of which Isaiah spoke was referred to as the

shekina glory of God—the brilliant, light of God’s glory.

- ▶ God’s glory would light the new city of faith.
- ▶ Prophets did not simply reveal future events even though that is what most people think the prophet’s primary role encompassed. Prophets proclaimed the mind, heart and will of God. Prophets challenged the people to fidelity. Prophets revealed God’s will for the people in their current everyday lives and they revealed God’s promise for the future. Most often their message was met with resistance and persecution. Prophets were often put to death for being the bearers of the news the people did not want to hear.
- ▶ In this instance the prophet Isaiah looked to the promised future *shekina* glory of God in light of their return from exile.
- ▶ Isaiah kept the vision of God’s future *shekina* glory in the Old Testament and John the Evangelist kept in the New Testament in the Book of Revelation in which he saw the *shekina* glory of God in the new heavens and the new earth.
- ▶ Today’s reading and all such eschatological readings proclaim the majesty of God’s reign in the here and now and in not yet.
- ▶ It is referred to as a typological reading. A typological reading is one in that foreshadows a future event. In other words, it looks forward to the fulfillment of the text in the future. For example, the early Christian community understood Isaiah’s Suffering Servant in a typological sense; they believed the Suffering Servant was a prototype for Christ.
- ▶ When we hear of gentiles riding on camels with their gifts of gold, frankincense and myrrh in this reading from Isaiah we are immediately transported to the New Testament fulfillment of that reading in the story of Magi of the East bearing gifts.



Mystagogy

reflection on the mysteries

Catechist invites participants to respond to the following questions.

- ▶ What does the word prophecy mean to you? Who are the prophets of today and what do they tell us?
- ▶ What is the Good News in this reading for today’s listener?
- ▶ What is the inherent hope in this reading?
- ▶ What does this hope have to do with your life today as a Christian?
- ▶ Why might this be a word of consolation for you at this time in your life?
- ▶ What are the implications for Christians?

Second Reading: Ephesians 3: 2-3, 5-6

- ▶ Paul’s letter to the Ephesians reiterates the promise of Isaiah in which the entire world is heir to God’s promise—Jews and Gentiles stand together as recipients of

God's salvation.

- ▶ The entire world—men, women and children—people from all races and nations will process to the holy city singing praise to the God of illuminating majesty.
- ▶ All of the readings of this feast are a testament to God's universal reign and his promise of salvation for everyone. No one is left out. All human beings are included in the covenant God forged. He did not simply forge it with the people of Israel—he entered into a binding covenant with the entire human race.
- ▶ Paul upholds two themes—God's revelation through Christ and the universality of salvation.



Mystagogy

reflection on the mysteries

Catechist invites participants to respond to one or more of the following questions in the wider group. Catechist responds first. For an example refer to appendix #2.

- ▶ If the message of Jesus is universality—that all are equal in the reign of God, for who is today's reading Good News?
- ▶ In what way is it good news for you?
- ▶ How do you feel about the truth that salvation is for everyone?
- ▶ How do you feel about Muslims being included in among those who are saved? How about Buddhists and Hindus?
- ▶ What do you think our Church teaches about who is saved and who is not?
- ▶ What are the implications for your life?

Gospel: Mathew 2, 1-12

Read or summarize the Gospel, perhaps provide a copy of the text for further reflection.

Gospel Exegesis

Please note: catechist may intersperse the questions at the end of the exegesis throughout your presentation where appropriate.) Catechist invites participants to respond to the following questions before presenting the exegesis.

- ▶ What specifically touched you in this Gospel?
- ▶ What does this Gospel mean to you?
- ▶ Matthew's concern in this reading is not to provide a detailed history. His intention is to express a profound theology of God's manifestation. History is but the vehicle.
- ▶ That is not to say that it is not historical. While something did indeed occur, Matthew is not all that concerned about the details.
- ▶ He wants readers and future generations to be captured and caught up in a story that expresses a most profound truth of God's manifestation to the world.
- ▶ Matthew sets the stage by placing this event in the midst of a cultural, political reality. Herod had a maniacal fear of uprising—that he would be overthrown.

- ▶ There is dripping irony in this scene. The scribes and Pharisees are told of the prophesied place of the messiah's birth. They who should have stood at attention and taken notice were untouched. Herod, on the other hand took it dead seriously. A story about a prophesied king of the Jews is just what was needed to feed his growing neurosis!
- ▶ Psalm seventy-two speaks of kings from Tarshish bearing gifts. The underlying assumption of today's Gospel is that the kings of this narrative are those very same kings from Persia referred to in Psalm seventy-two.
- ▶ It is assumed there were three kings because of the three gifts that were mentioned. Later Christian tradition named the kings Bathasar, Melchior and Casper.
- ▶ The three wise men eventually became icons of the universality of God's plan of salvation—the diversity of the Church and manifestation of God to the Gentile world.
- ▶ The reference to the star is a fulfillment of an Old Testament prophecy in the Book of Numbers that associated the coming of the messiah with a star.
- ▶ Matthew drives home the point that the magi are a sign that Christ manifested himself to people from faraway places.
- ▶ More irony fills the pages of Matthew's account. The scribes and Pharisees who dismissed Christ as the Messiah are the very people who cited the Scripture passages about him to the kings and in so doing led them right to him.
- ▶ The kings find the child, are transformed by their encounter and leave by a different route so as not to alert Herod.
- ▶ We are made aware of their metanoia by their change in direction. In Scripture a change in direction signifies a change of heart.
- ▶ Astral religions were very popular in antiquity because the stars were so predictable. Some early Christian commentators were worried that attention to the star in this story was an accommodation to those astral religions. Matthew is clear, however. The star is simply a means to an end—the means was to provide direction, the end was finding the Christ, Redeemer and Savior of the world, the only deity in whom hopes, desires and life itself should be placed.
- ▶ Later in the tradition the gifts of gold, frankincense and myrrh were signs of the kingship of Christ.
- ▶ Epiphany is a feast of God's manifestation, a feast of Salvation through Christ, a feast celebrating the Incarnation of God's Son who would save the world by his passion, death and resurrection.
- ▶ The shekina glory of God is proclaimed and his triumphant majesty shines brightly for the entire world to see.
- ▶ The feast of Epiphany is a feast of God's manifestation that is situated squarely in the Christmas cycle.
- ▶ God manifests himself to the world. As a result of the Incarnation God sanctifies all of creation; God sanctifies all humanity.
- ▶ Christ took the form of a human being and in so doing elevated the human heart with a divine nature.
- ▶ Jesus reigns triumphant from his throne in heaven. This feast echoes the feast of

Christ the King. God is Lord of the entire universe, not simply a chosen few.

- ▶ There is a missionary thrust to this feast. God's people have been shown the light and as a result can do no less than take that light out to a world darkened by the ravages of sin.
- ▶ Verse three reminds us that all nations will come to see his light. We are agents of that light.



Mystagogy

reflection on the mysteries

Catechist invites participants to respond to the following questions in small groups of four. Use the last three or four minutes to surface the insights in the wider group.

- ▶ If this is a feast that invites us to proclaim the glory of God for saving a world from itself, in what way have you reflected upon the implications of this season for your life? How has Christ saved you from yourself?
- ▶ What has this season of Advent and Christmas taught you about your relationship with God?
- ▶ Few of us are called to be missionaries. However, if this is a missionary feast we all must, in some way be called to participate in the missionary aspect of Christianity. How are you called to take royal gifts out to your respective world? What do you have to give to the world? What gifts do you bring?
- ▶ What mark have you made on this earth if you were to die tomorrow?
- ▶ Have you ever made a change of direction in your life that resulted in conversion, a change of heart or becoming closer to God?
- ▶ If the feast of Epiphany is a great missionary feast, how might you adopt a missionary spirit? How might you become a missionary in your own world?
- ▶ What does the feast of Epiphany have to say to what is going on in your life right now?

Catechist shares first, and then invites participants to respond. See appendix #3 or example)

- ▶ Catechist invites participants to silently reflect on the following question (@ three minutes)
- ▶ What one thing are you willing to do this week to be a better disciple/prophet in your world? Is there something that needs to change in your life?

Concluding Prayer

Option 1. Celebrate a minor rite—an exorcism or blessing for catechumens: RCIA 90-97

Option 2. Pray the Prayer of Pope Clement

Option 3. Other suitable, but brief prayer. (Perhaps pray the Prayer of St. Francis.)

APPENDIX

1. I am intimately touched by Isaiah's image of the future *shekina* glory of God. Every time I hear the passage from John about the new heaven and the new earth, I find myself imaging that future day. Serious health issues remind me of the transitory nature of life here on earth. I have of late been reflecting upon God's shekina glory. I long for that future day when tears will be no more and the darkness of earthly sin will be forever replaced by the illumination of Christ's eternal Light. Isaiah points to it, our liturgy celebrates it and our faith affirms it.

2. I once attended a workshop by a Muslim imam. He shared his life of faith with a gathered convention of Catholics in hopes of bridging the divide that was sweeping our nation. I was profoundly touched by the complete conversion of heart and the love of God this man shared with us that day. At the end of the session I told myself that I could only hope to become as holy as he was holy—I was amazingly touched by the way in which his entire life and the life of his family is ordered around prayer, peace and love of God. He shared how he had suffered a great deal for making the choice to become an imam. His father had other plans for his future. When he made the choice for God over the wishes of his father his father rejected him. He was persecuted for his complete faith and devotion to God.

He told us about the true meaning of Jihad—that its original unadulterated meaning is holy pilgrimage. He reminded us that we were on a jihad—we were on a holy pilgrimage to learn more about God. He was terribly saddened by the hateful minority who would radically distort the Quran. He reminded us that Islam means peace and that true Muslims are committed to the promotion of peace and that the love of God is their banner. I was amazingly touched. I left there having no doubt that this man would be sitting at the feet of the living Lord in the kingdom yet to come. I was awe struck by the truth of the universality of God's message of salvation.

3. As someone who is struggling with issues of mortality centered around health concerns today's liturgy offered an opportunity to reflect on the meaning of life. In response to the question regarding if I were to die tomorrow: I would hope people would look at my life and say that I was a loving person. I would hope they would say that I did all in my power to bring Christ's light to the world. I hope they would say that I have a passion for God's word and like the wise men tried to seek that light throughout my life. I hope they would look kindly on my sinfulness and not judge my arrogance too harshly. I hope they would see in me a servant of the Lord who struggled throughout her life to live the Paschal Mystery even though she similarly struggled with doubt, confusion and wonder over the paradox of the cross. Above all I hope they would see in me a child of God who tried in earnest to live her baptismal role as priest to serve God's people, prophet to proclaim God word through her words and her actions and king to lead all people universally to the bosom of Christ, albeit imperfectly.



Connecting Liturgy with Catholic Doctrine

Possible doctrinal themes that flow from this week's
Liturgy of the Word and Eucharist

Evangelization
Ecumenism
Holy Spirit
Salvation/Soteriology

Incarnation
Miracles
Jesus Christ

Other themes may be chosen as well--choose from the index of doctrinal topics and create your own connecting statement. The following statements make the appropriate connections between the doctrinal issue you have chosen and the liturgy of the day.

EVANGELIZATION

Today's liturgy has a missionary thrust. Christ's light goes out to the entire world and who but faithful Christians will be the bearers of that Light? Today's feast of the Epiphany is a most appropriate occasion to focus our attention on what the Church teaches about our responsibility to go out and share the Good News with the world. Our doctrinal focus today will be EVANGELIZATION.

ECUMENISM

Today's liturgy reminds us that God's manifestation is to the entire world. It is a universal message of salvation. It is thus a most appropriate occasion to focus our attention on what the Church teaches about ECUMENISM.

HOLY SPIRIT

The missionary thrust of today's Gospel and feast can only go forward by the power of the Holy Spirit. Christ's Light continues to shine through the work of God's Spirit in the world. The Holy Spirit empowers us for the work Christ began. The Spirit works in our lives and in our Church to continue light the world darkened by sin. It is thus a most appropriate occasion to reflect on what the Church teaches us about the HOLY SPIRIT.

SALVATION/SOTERIOLOGY

Today's feast is a celebration of salvation par excellence. The fulfillment of God's plan of salvation for the world is inaugurated through the Incarnation of God's Son and the light that will go out to all the nations. Today's doctrinal extended session will focus on what the Church teaches about SALVATION/SOTERIOLOGY.

INCARNATION

The magi came to honor the newborn King. Today's feast exalts the manifestation of God to the world. Without the incarnation there would be no death and resurrection, without death and resurrection of the Christ there would be no salvation. Thus, the Incarnation of Christ is the most central story in the salvation epic. Thus today we will focus our doctrinal session on the INCARNATION of CHRIST.

MIRACLES

The entire Christmas cycle is a cacophony of miracles. An angel appears to Mary. A virgin gives birth. A star leads the kings to the manger. Luke often used the vehicle of miracles to bring people to initial conversion in Christ. Miracles were the catalyst that opened people's eyes to really encounter the Christ. Today's liturgy invites a reflection on the role of MIRACLES in Christian life--what we believe about them, their intended purpose, etc. Today's doctrinal extended session will focus on what the Church teaches us about MIRACLES.

JESUS CHRIST

If ever a feast celebrated what Christians believe about Christ, this is it. Today's feast is a testament to his sovereignty, his Lordship, his universal reign and his role as Light, Savior and Redeemer of the world. It is thus most appropriate to focus our attention today on JESUS CHRIST.